

Power plants survive power play

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EDITORIAL

Reid fails in effort to kill coal-fired facilities.

Southern Nevadans tired of seeing their checkbooks clobbered by electric bills got some great news Monday: Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid failed in his first legislative effort to block the construction of new coal-fired power plants near Ely.

Demand for power in the fast-growing Southwest is rising much more quickly than supply. A handful of energy companies, including Nevada Power parent Sierra Pacific Resources, have invested millions of dollars planning new power plants for rural areas north of the Las Vegas Valley. These new stations won't generate anywhere near enough electricity to meet the state's long-term needs, but they have the potential to one day stabilize power rates -- assuming they're built and operating five years from now.

Without these new plants, power bills will continue to skyrocket, demand for electricity will quickly outstrip supply and residents and businesses will eventually confront the likelihood of rolling blackouts on hot summer days. The blow to Southern Nevada's economy and quality of life would be devastating.

But Sen. Reid sided earlier this year with environmentalists and Learjet liberals -- and against cash-strapped Nevada households -- by vowing to do everything in his considerable power to kill the multibillion-dollar energy complex. He says carbon dioxide emissions from the plants would create unacceptable levels of air pollution in rural Nevada and worsen global warming.

With Congress scrambling to cobble together a massive omnibus spending bill before Christmas recess, Sen. Reid tried to insert language designating Great Basin National Park a Class I air quality protection area. That standard likely would have compelled the federal government to halt development of the power plants, but Republican Reps. Jon Porter and Dean Heller of Nevada and Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., were able to keep the language out of the bill.

Instead, the omnibus bill contains a compromise that calls for the nonpartisan General Accountability Office to evaluate air quality at the national park outside Ely and to recommend whether it should receive the highest level of federal protection under the Clean Air Act. The deal forestalls any congressional action on the coal plants into next year.

Sen. Reid wants all of Nevada's future energy needs met through conservation and renewable resources, such as solar, wind and geothermal power. But doing so would

enrage the same environmentalists Sen. Reid is trying to placate by erecting wind turbines and solar panels across mountain ranges and open desert and stringing transmission lines everywhere in between. The technology is so expensive it would at least triple current power bills. And renewables at this point can't provide the consistent generation that ensures everyone can run their air conditioners during peak periods of demand.

Because global warming alarmists such as Sen. Reid stand ready to use their doomsday red herring to fight any proposed new, clean-burning coal power plant, older, dirtier coal-fired plants that should have been closed years ago are still in operation. Replacing each of these outdated generating stations with new plants could reduce national carbon dioxide emissions by between 30 and 40 percent solely through efficiency.

The Nevada Division of Environmental Protection is the proper regulatory authority here, and the state has thus far found no reason to halt construction of the plants.

Sen. Reid should abandon this nonsensical crusade and, for once, put his constituents' needs ahead of his party's fundraising. The longer he meddles in this issue, the longer it will take to get the power plants built -- and the more they will cost. Right now, he's blowing more smoke than the proposed power plants ever will.